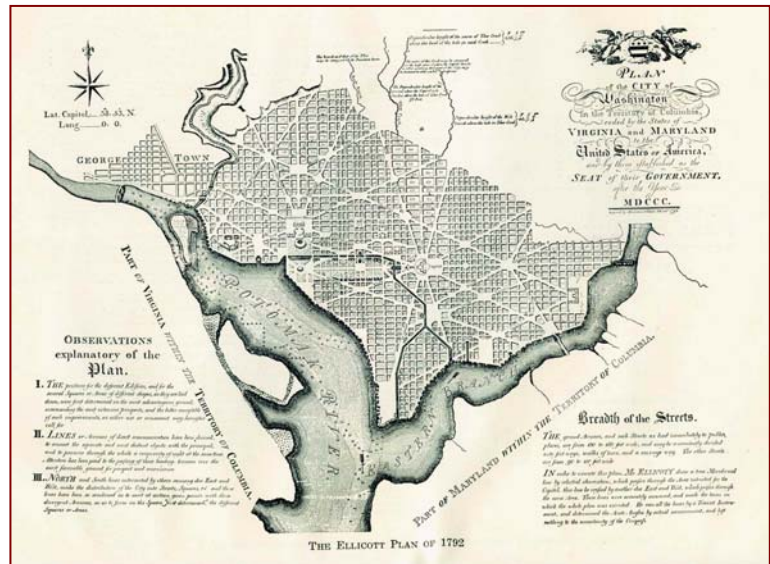


A PERSPECTIVE

HISTORY OF THE SOUTH CAPITOL STREET STUDY AREA HOW THE STUDY AREA CAME TO EXHIBIT ITS PRESENT CONDITIONS

By
Joseph Passonneau, FAIA, ASCE

In March 1791, Pierre Charles L'Enfant arrived in Georgetown, a tobacco port below the Great Falls of the Potomac, at the farthest point from the sea that 18th-century shipping could sail up the Potomac River. L'Enfant had been charged by President George Washington with locating sites for public buildings. L'Enfant interpreted his charge broadly, and designed a city. Broad avenues, radiating from the important public places, covered an area larger than Colonial Boston, New York, and Philadelphia combined. The L'Enfant city contained the growth of the National Capital for over a century.



The Ellicott Version of the L'Enfant Plan

Radiating from the Capitol are North, South, and East Capitol Streets; New Jersey Avenue, NW and SE; Delaware Avenue, NE and SW; and the Mall. The South Capitol Street right-of-way is 130 feet wide; the New Jersey and Delaware right-of-ways are 160 feet wide.

L'Enfant assumed that commercial development would be concentrated along East Capitol Street. Developers who made the same assumption went bankrupt; the pull of Georgetown and the President's House was too strong and commerce first developed between the Capitol and the White House.

President Washington located the Navy Yard on the north side of the Anacostia River. The Navy Yard was Washington's primary civilian employer until the end of the Second World War, and residential development began, to the east and south, in an arc between the Capitol and the Navy Yard. The extension of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal along what is now Constitution Avenue, continuing south of the Capitol, cut off Southwest Washington, including the South Capitol Street corridor, from the heart of Washington.



The Navy Yard, from across the Anacostia River, 1835

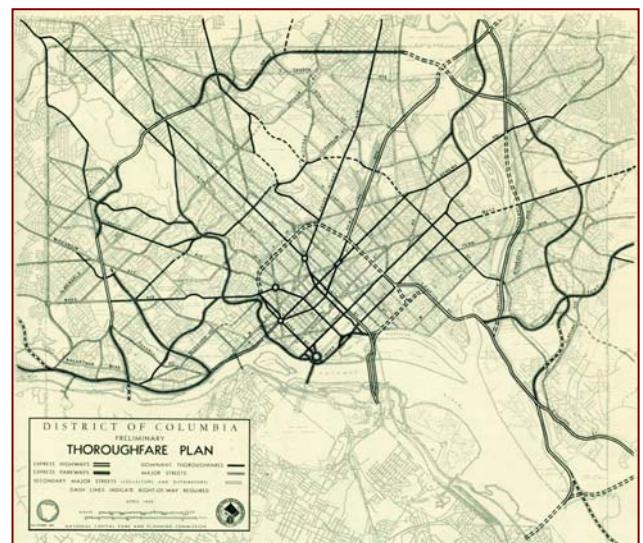
Before the Civil War, a bridge had been built across the Anacostia River, at 11th Street, to a residential community south of the River. It was this bridge that Booth crossed when he fled Washington after he had assassinated President Lincoln.

During the Civil War, men and material were moved to the front, by railroad, at speeds and in quantities previously undreamed of. After the War, railroads soon laced the country. The first railroad, the Baltimore and Ohio, had entered Washington from the north along Delaware Avenue, in 1835. After the war, the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad was brought into the city from the south, on embankment on Maryland and

Virginia Avenues, to a station and marshalling yard on the Mall at 6th Street. This station and railroad on the Mall were the most difficult issues that the Senate Park (McMillan) Commission dealt with in 1901. The location on the Mall was eliminated, replaced by a tunnel under East 1st Street to the new Union Station north of Massachusetts Avenue. But the railroad on Maryland and Virginia Avenue remained, with the line on Virginia Avenue cutting across South Capitol Street and across Delaware and New Jersey Avenues.

After the Second World War, the Anacostia Freeway was built along the south bank of the Anacostia River. It connected with East Capitol Street and with South Capitol Street at a bridge cutting diagonally southeast to a partial cloverleaf interchange with the Freeway and with Suitland Parkway. Also, after the Second World War the centers of American cities were devastated, as residents, and the commerce that served them, left for the suburbs. In 1955, in an attempt to stop this drain on Washington's center, the three District Commissioners and the Federal Bureau of Public Roads proposed an Inner Loop Freeway System surrounding the downtown.

The South Leg of the Inner Loop was built south of the Mall, following the railroad, elevated on Virginia Avenue through Capitol Hill. The Center Leg was planned, depressed, under the Mall and through the business district, to connect with the North Leg. The East Leg was planned through Capitol Hill, between the North Leg and the South Leg, along 11th Street to interchange with the Anacostia Freeway. Five interstate radial freeways were to connect the Inner Loop with three "Outer Beltways."



Proposed Regional Thoroughfare Plan for the National Capital Region as Shown in the Comprehensive Plan, 1950



The Southeast Freeway

But when the South Leg of the Inner Loop, now called the Southwest and Southeast Freeways, were completed, the reaction was negative, intense and sustained. In 1976, after a battle that lasted a decade and a half, Mayor Walter Washington, the city's first Home Rule mayor, announced that the money allocated to the Inner Loop would be used to finance Metrorail construction. The Capital Beltway had also been completed. Not only the Inner Loop, but the entire un-built part of the planned 450-mile freeway system through the National Capital Region was "demapped," stricken from the books.

The future success of the South Capitol Street corridor will depend on removing both the Southeast Freeway and the railroad. In the mid-1990s, the National Capital Planning Commission, in its *Extending the Legacy* plans, proposed that the Southwest and Southeast Freeway be tunneled under Virginia Avenue, and that the railroad be moved.

While the future of South Capitol Street will depend on accomplishing the objectives of both proposals, the specific recommendations in *Extending the Legacy* are not practical. First, there is no way that the Southwest Freeway, with its large, complex turning movements, can be removed in any way without drastically reducing access to the center of Washington.

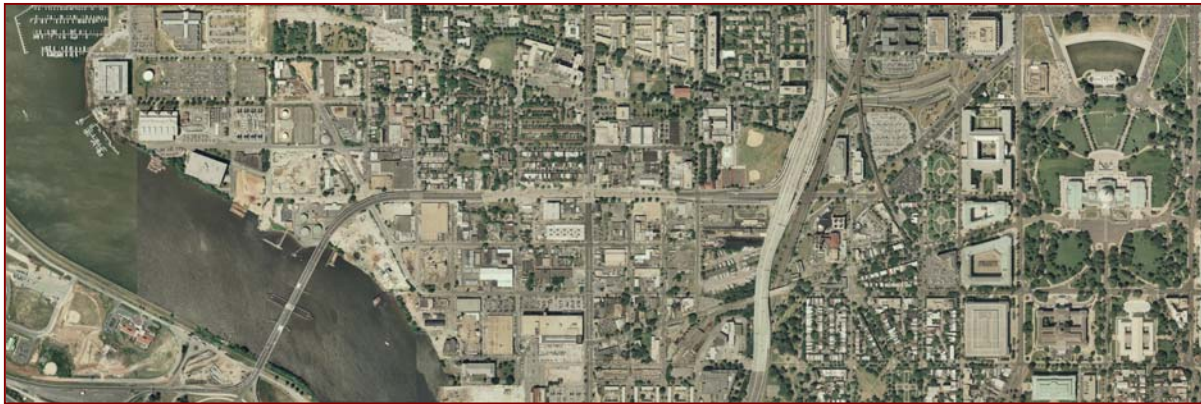
Second, there is no possible way to tunnel the southeast Freeway under Virginia Avenue without creating unacceptable disruption to the Capitol Hill neighborhood and to traffic now on the Freeway. But instead the Southeast Freeway between 11th Street and the Southwest Freeway could be carried in a tunnel within the South Capitol Street corridor. Now that bored tunneling costs no more than cut-and-cover tunneling, this can be accomplished without great disruption. East of 11th Street, the Southeast Freeway carries little traffic; it can and should be replaced by a recreated Virginia Avenue, immediately. About eleven acres of land would be returned to the Capitol Hill neighborhood. This would be a low-cost, high-return project, which could set the stage for tackling the more difficult problems that beset South Capitol Street.



South Capitol Street, Looking North to The Capitol

Third, the proposal to relocate the railroad south of the Anacostia River would not be tolerated by that neighborhood, and WMATA plans to use the present, abandoned railroad right-of-way for public transit. But the railroad could be carried, continuously with the passenger railroad, to reach the marshalling yards north of New York Avenue. As part of the freeway building mania after the Second World War, an underpass was built on South Capitol Street, at South M Street. NCPC has also recommended that this underpass be eliminated, and that South Capitol Street be recreated as a tree-lined, urban boulevard.

Finally, all of these improvements to South Capitol Street are elements in the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative (AWI). This Initiative, at the beginning of the 21st century, is the most ambitious, and most important public planning project since the work of the Senate Park Commission at the beginning of the 20th century. At a different location, it addresses many of the same problems of that earlier enterprise.



South Capitol Street Study Area, Aerial View

Like the Senate Park Commission, it will take many decades and will cost a great deal of money before the work of the AWI is completed. Like the successful completion of the work of the Park Commission, completion of the work of the AWI will depend on support from the federal government.